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SCIENCE

FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 1915

THE CLASSIFICATION OF NERVOUS RE-ACTIONS¹

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It is within the memory of most of us what a distinct advance was made in the definiteness of our thinking about nervous reactions when the introduction and improvement of the Golgi method led up to the conception of the neurone doctrine. Previous to that time our mental picture of the reflex mechanism was not essentially incorrect; but its conception of the nature of the connection between the sensory fiber and the motor nerve cell was indefinite. When the new histological method revealed the posterior root fibers entering the cord and by means of collaterals ending in the immediate neighborhood of motor cells, there was revealed an almost diagrammatic mechanism which explained many reflex phenomena; and we can recall the enthusiasm with which all proceeded to construct combinations of neurones to serve as the anatomical basis of the various known functions of the nervous system; indeed, we have been engaged in this fascinating pastime ever since.

This is exactly as it should be, for only in this way could the possibilities of the new discovery be tried out. There is danger, however, in anything which is attractively definite; sometimes because it may belong among those things which are "too good to be true"; but more frequently because its successful explanation of many of the phenomena with which it deals may blind us to its failure to explain others;

¹Address of the chairman and vice-president of Section K (Physiology and Experimental Medicine), American Association for the Advancement of Science, Philadelphia, December 31, 1914.